

*Power Cut*

When the lights went off, Annie Stevens looked right at Mr Phelps, his first name was Warwick which excited her because it was like sturdy churches and metallic tang of coin, and the instant before they both lost their bodies to the dark she saw the whole course of their future relations, there in his rather small and squinted eyes, too close-set in an average face, the face of a B&B proprietor. It was a beginning, although they had met two nights before when she handed him her credit card and explained that she was here for her son, he was in a boat race, not the big one but round the Needles nevertheless, down from Southampton University. Mr Phelps explained that she would be in Room Four, which was at the top of the building and on the side, but what he should have said was that it was on two sides, the house being of triangular build bang centre of the Isle of Wight with three roads meeting around it, that is not to say busy ones, but nevertheless the house islanded thus meant that Annie's room was all angles and sun coming in in odd places. It was very light, and though small she felt she barely occupied it. She had lost weight and presence, somehow, since Harry ended it, though that was now a good five years ago. The important thing was that it was he who sat her down and said we both knew this day would come, and that particular ending did not end for her, so that she went round their old home which of course he left, himself finding a flat in town and soon picking up with Nancy from the office, and she kept those words deep within and it was only just today that something lifted, or rather she felt that maybe it had been absent a good while, and when Mr Phelps handed her a torch and said Annie! We are in a pickle, she found herself disturbed, deeply.

Only earlier that day she had stood looking about her in her corner room, butter yellow on the wall and a little pine chest of drawers on which she had neatly arranged accoutrements essential to travel. The few clothes she had brought were folded neatly in drawers, but her good dress was hanging on the back of the door, jacket demurely covering, and every time she saw it she felt a little lighter and caught herself in the mirror with a smile that was not necessarily flattering but nevertheless made her remember that it was warm and she could hear the occasional car beating down the quiet road and the breeze was coming through the window and not far, never far, was the sea. The jacket was baby blue, it was a treat from Michael for Christmas, handing it to his mum and saying here you need something new, always going

about in that old cardigan. When she wore it she was reminded, for an instant, of a nervous and proud first lady on inauguration, sometimes of a high flying exec, sometimes of a ballet dancer on a day off. It gave her bulk and helped fill out the empty spaces there, in her little room number four, just her small travel bag on the floor and so much space and shadow and light around her! She lined up her two pairs of shoes with a little gap between each, and this was welcoming. Just then she heard voices on the stairs, so she knew that the elderly couple – she corrected herself they can't have been so much older than her – next door were back from their trip to Ventnor, they had skipped breakfast under some strange belief that they had to set out at the crack of dawn before the crowds came in, despite Warwick's, well, Mr Phelps', assurances that March was still a little too cold for most of the visitors and the roads were never busier than your average country B road. Annie thought this was particularly fine, average country B road, and it reminded her of something Harry used to say about Bleeding M1, although that was said in an entirely different spirit, one of irritation and a mock Dickensian pretension that at the end had slightly bored Annie, but still she would raise her eyebrows or shake her head whenever he ventured this particular remark. Mr Phelps' comment was said with a quiet and confident intuition, yes very so, for B roads in England are rarely busy, and winding ones such as are found in parts of middle England and especially the Welsh borders rarely attract more than an average number of vehicles.

Annie would have waited for them to go into their rooms before she went out for her stroll, but they seemed to wish to loiter just there on the landing, discussing the fine array of shops selling local pottery and crafts and whether they really should have got the duck for Julie. Annie was collecting her things together, slowly, purse in handbag and even mobile phone for if Michael wanted to ring her to tell her about the pub last night or whether they had a chance to get out on the waves yet, and she put the slim paperback in, although she had found herself stuck on the first ten pages, finding sometimes with books a stumbling block there which frustrated her efforts, but she knew that once over it there was in all probability a fine world to be entered, and this one had come after all with recommendation from Richard and Judy's book club. She would find a quiet spot overlooking the sea and settle to it, if she got to page fifty then she would certainly be over the worst of it, and by then it would be time to sample the packed lunch Warwick had so kindly agreed to provide her with, though it went over and beyond the duty of the B&B owner to do so. She shut the window, and they were still out in the hall so with a sigh she slipped her feet into her shoes and firmly opened the door. Oh hello she said, and asked them a few words about their trip. It was a little blowy by the coast, and Tom's map didn't have half the roads on it, but there was a lovely view from the Whitwell road over the town and the sea too. Mrs was about to ask Annie whether she wished to eat with them that evening at the little pub down the road – she had made a few tentative preludes to this invitation and Annie wished to side-step it and so said oh I must be going before the day goes off enjoy your afternoon and quickly clipped down the stairs. She heard them return to their room after that, and if she lingered a little too long by the open kitchen door just to see if anyone was in there, it was only because there was such a strong smell of lavender coming in from the open window, and the sun was falling across the oak table cutting the fruit bowl in half in such a way that it really would have made a lovely painting. The emptiness of the room, however, was incontrovertible, and so Annie closed the

front door behind her and was fiddling in her bag to check her keys when she almost walked into Mr Phelps coming up the path.

Annie! He said, and for the first time she noticed how her name when spoken by him was a surprised and amused exclamation, as if she had popped out of nothing into existence, every time they met. He had a newspaper under his arm, by the look of it a local rag, and the other hand held a co-op bag, the sides of which fluttered gracefully and whitely in the breeze. Do enjoy your stroll, he said, and she at the same time said the Campbells are back from Ventnor, and both laughed, and then there was a little silence, in which there was time for Annie to notice that his eyes had a little grey in them and that his stomach slightly curved over his belt where the polo shirt was tucked into slacks, but not more than was as should be, for a man of his age and height. Well! He said, do have dinner if you've no other plans, I think Mary in room one is eating in, I'm sure she'd be glad of company. I think you'd approve of the spread! Annie made polite noises in agreement and then with a determined nod walked on down the path, brushing the sleeve of her jacket against his bare arm as she passed him. These details were by the by, because as yet the day was sunny and all of the lights – though not needed – would have functioned adequately, and Mr Phelps was still a kind and friendly man whom Annie was paying to stay in his corner house on the Isle of Wight.

As she turned right taking the narrowest of the roads, though not without regret seeing the inviting curve of the other two, one heading beautifully into shadow and some trees around the bend and the other seeming to have the promise of sea at its end, Annie considered whether his invitation to a meal was something she was interested in. Certainly Mary seemed a friendly woman, though a little young, staying for a few days as a break from it all, in her own words, 'it all' being a job in a publisher's in London and everything that goes with that sort of lifestyle. She was obviously an intellectual sort but also had that deep-down uncertainty which single women have, though it was shielded by a brash and boyish confidence. Mr Phelps ran a sometime impromptu restaurant for guests, and the menu was reasonably priced, and as his immaculate breakfasts proved, he was a capable chef. Annie struck off the road, noting the footpath sign and took a track which headed up the slight incline, it was not too steep, but enough to bring the colour to her cheeks and for her to remember how good Harry was at climbing, with his long legs, hardly getting out of breath. It was not long before she had reached the top of the hill and from there she found the path turning, as it must for below was sea, and she was glad to have found this way to the edge of the land. It was always here as if the sea was coming at you from around every corner, lapping inwards, and Annie felt with joy that her neat bob was being lifted by the breeze and yet the sun was just warm as it ought to be on her cheeks. She sighed with satisfaction and determined to walk parallel with the blue, for up ahead seemed some sort of monument and there would be a fine place to stop and read.

Striding with such a clear purpose made Annie feel almost giddy with lightness, as if lifting one foot she would take off completely and float above this green and rolling island. When booking the trip she had worried that memories of her last time here would fill her mind, how it was when she and Harry had only newly married and came for a week's walking, getting to know the hills and shores. Back then he had been a rather nervous but charming solicitor and she and he arm in arm felt to be king and queen of this small but golden land, and at

night they would eat in one of the towns on the coast in some small restaurant and through the open window the salt breeze coming in was exactly as if they were on the Med, warm nights never enough to disguise the terrible and wonderful blackness that is the sea after the sun has retired, the occasional ghostly white curl of wave and the sound of constant motion. After that holiday they had both become very busy at work and then of course Michael came along, and if at the end looking back it was apparent that they could have spent more times like these if they had just slowed a little, and looked about them, at the days as they passed so mercilessly, well, mistakes had been made on both sides, and what was done was done. Annie would never regret that they came here. After, their holidays were occasional, the teetering and tropical greys of Cornwall in the heat, or those great Scottish mountains, and though pleasant, they never held the mirth, the wonder of that week, in the first year of their marriage.

The place hadn't changed much. Some shops had opened, some had closed down, and there were more people of course, but in essentials it was very much the same. The sea and the sky were blue and clear and to her right the top of the ridge was yellow and arched like the spine of a slumbering cat and on its back was one of those bent over and gnarled trees peculiar to Hardy adaptations on television, fine in silhouette, and so resonant of the hangman's gibbet, of the persistence of all nature to survive, or at least to try to, at whatever cost. On such a golden day, though, it seemed quite incongruous, and it was to Annie a beautiful and sad thing and she felt her heart lend itself to such a view, lonely tree on sun-touched grassland. Up ahead now was what she had thought was a monument, but close by it looked more like an ancient attempt at space rocket, naively drawn, a small and squat stone tower, circular, with pointed roof and two windows. She sat with her back to the warm stone, with her legs straight out in front like a seated ragdoll. A minute to accustom herself to surroundings, there were a few waves on the sea, and one peculiar cloud had plopped itself to the east, drifting slightly, hoping to find company. Annie's face was to the sun, and behind her the shadow of the tower was now coming into being, creeping slowly longer so that by the time she had checked her phone for contact from her son – and felt a little sad that there had been none – picked up her book, concentrated on it for a good fifteen minutes, thrown it down and eaten a sandwich, which was ham, mustard and salad and beautifully cut, picked up her book again and with an increasing sense of frustration put it down again, eaten the other sandwich, spent a little time watching the progress of some ants up the flank of the tower, and then stood up feeling the annoyance that comes with veering off the course of a carefully thought-out plan, by now the cloud was nowhere to be seen, and the only indicator that the day was a little older, a little changed, was that the wind had dropped and the shadow behind Annie had grown, and was now stretching out and cooling the grass as it went.

She decided to drop down to the sea, and this seemed the only thing to do in light of the difficulties she was having with her novel, and the fact that her son had not bothered to ring, not even a poorly spelt text message. Well, books were for days indoors and never for the sun, never for when the sea was just there as if nudging her, again and again, like a dog with a ball running back and forth. And of course Michael was out with his friends or probably still sleeping, curtains closed against such a bright day as this, and with these assurances Annie set off through the grass, descending until she gained a track coming up from a car park

below, and from there she soon found herself on a pebbly beach, standing, a little perplexed as to what to do now, in front of the waves, a horizon of blue pressed by another. She had sat herself on a large rock and was feeling a little better, soothed by the noise of the sea and the occasional scream of gull, and was remembering that when she got back home, in three days time, there would be plenty of things to do, and probably Harry would phone her to ask how the trip had been, and she would answer the phone with the usual friendly and brisk detachedness that had become the norm since relations between them had ended. Her friends, and in particular her neighbour Ellen, said it was not good form for him to ring so frequently, although really it was only once a week, and that it did her no favours, but Annie didn't mind the contact, it reassured her that there was still some connection, that he still knew the little doings of her life, twenty years of marriage not cast off quite so easily. There would be plenty to keep her occupied and her volunteering at the charity shop would pick up, trying to put some order into all of these confused and meddling old women. It had become a matter of pride to whip the British Heart Foundation local branch into shape, as though this small act would go some way to alleviating most heart problems in the British Isles. It was her own, small, battle, and she was winning. There was a lot more quality stock in since the new Marks had opened in town, and the kids came in these days, looking for vintage on a pocket-money salary. She would spend the next few days pleasantly, tomorrow afternoon was Michael's race, and on her last day she had found a National Trust property, though she must ask Mr Phelps about buses to the other end of the island. At the thought of him she remembered the grey in his eyes and the hairs on his wide and muscular forearms. So strange not to have a wife, such a friendly and capable man. Yes, she would eat with Mary tonight, and so what that her book hadn't picked up, she had another, though it was a personal thing with Annie never to give up on a book once started. But, she reminded herself, different rules apply on holiday.

A young couple, early twenties, had insinuated themselves into the edge of her vision, and she watched them move closer, across in front of her, making a game of being so near the waves. He got a shoe wet, she chided and laughed, and then they kissed. They didn't look at Annie, though she would have smiled and been happy to share a little in their glow. Just kept walking, hand in hand. A little way down the beach he stopped to skim stones, and she stood a little apart, and then they continued, no longer holding hands. Was not so long since she had been like them, and Annie allowed herself one of those light but unbecoming smiles which had become the norm on her small and delicately featured face. She heard voices behind her, a teenage boy and parents, he was complaining about something and they were telling him to stop moaning. Annie turned and looked with interest at the parents, the boy saw this and said, in a quieter voice – after all they were still some metres away from her – can't you ask that granny, she'd know where it is. Annie turned back, quickly, and felt something in her shift, like a thought that has been obscured moving into focus, somewhere in the back of all those tickings that is the mind. They were still moving closer, so she stood up, turned towards them and began to walk away, saying hello, with purpose, to the mother and father, who looked a little nonplussed. The walk back seemed interminable, and the heat of the afternoon must have really got to Annie because her head was hurting and all she wanted was a glass of water and a lie down. When she got into the hall of the B&B she heard voices

from the living room, it was Mr Phelps talking to Mary, but she did not pause and went quickly upstairs. When she shut the curtains on the day it was still hot and breezy, but these factors no longer charmed her. The curtains were blackout, but could not prevent a bar of white coming in underneath, making a gloom of the place, and it was in this dull almost-light that Annie stood in front of her jacket and dress hanging on the door. She thought of the ballet dancer on her day off, and with a quick motion pulled the coat hanger down and hung it in the wardrobe, closing the door rather too firmly. She had seen the last of the day's sun, for there was dark coming, and the next day would be overcast, and a little showery, and walking round the National Trust house on Friday the sun would be a weak and watery thing, trying, pointlessly, to light on the strong and certain lines of classical architecture. Annie went to sleep, and when she woke she had missed dinner, and the wind had come from somewhere, it pushed in after the sun went down, lifted the curtains of her room and touched her face, and out there was a moonless night, and the distant sound of thunder, which had seemed as unlikely as a hurricane in those golden earlier hours, was now a reality, coming ever closer. The first spots of rain fell on the bougainvillea, and a car's headlights came, and retreated. The hinges of the house, in the wheezings of radiators and tremors of doors, seemed to be shaking, waiting for what would come.

She was hungry, and went downstairs to see if there were any remnants from dinner. It was quiet apart from the wind, and she found Mr Phelps washing up in the kitchen. He turned when she walked in, and she remembered the word granny and that she had really got nowhere with her book and that Michael couldn't be bothered to ring her, and remembered too that Harry was somewhere with his "partner," that was the term, and here she was, on this island when the wind was picking up and almost carried Mr Phelps' next word out of the open window, racing to the sea. He put down his tea towel. Annie! He said, and then the lights went off.

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